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Forgotten Amid the Cheering

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■ **OPINION:** A Canadian manufacturer’s multibillion-dollar military vehicle deal with Saudi Arabia cries out for human rights considerations in such sales

Forgotten amid the cheering

Many people in Southwestern Ontario cheered when General Dynamics Land Systems in London scored a contract worth \$10 billion to \$13 billion to build armoured vehicles for Saudi Arabia, directly creating about 3,000 new jobs in economically hard-hit London.

Now that the tidal wave of enthusiasm for the contract has subsided, we must ask ourselves how to ethically link the sale of military armaments, like light-armoured vehicles (LAVs), to the human rights record of an undemocratic regime that is regularly cited as a serious human rights abuser by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Prof. Mohammad Fahad Muflih al-Qahtani, an economics professor and co-founder of one of the few Saudi Arabian human rights organizations, the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, went on a hunger strike in prison in early March, protesting his sentence of 10 years after being convicted on the basis of his association’s peaceful activism and its criticism of the authorities.

According to Amnesty International, al-Qahtani is guilty of nothing more than daring to criticize Saudi Arabia’s dire human rights record. “The reality is that the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is abysmal and anyone who risks highlighting flaws in the system is branded a criminal and tossed in a jail cell,” says Said Boumedouha, Amnesty International’s deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

By locking up prominent human rights activists like



al-Qahtani, Saudi Arabia is brazenly flouting its international obligations and displaying a flagrant disregard for rights to freedom of expression and association.

Further, under the discriminatory Saudi guardianship system, women and girls are forbidden from driving and prevented from travelling, conducting official business or undergoing certain medical procedures without permission from their male guardians. All Saudi women are required by law to obtain the permission of a male guardian before getting married, undertaking paid employment or enrolling in higher education. Such discriminatory rules mean that millions of women continue to be trapped in violent and abusive relationships or prevented from pursuing an education and career that would free them from government-imposed patriarchal oppression.

Very strict workforce and clothing requirements are enforced so governmental decrees regulate women’s work and impose strict sex segregation in the workplace, mandating that female workers not interact with men. Women are barred from certain professions and treated as second-class citizens.

The punishment for domestic violence is almost nonexistent. According to Human Rights Watch, the government failed to enact a 2011 draft law to combat violence against women and



children. Even if abusers are prosecuted, sentences are light. One court convicted a man for physically abusing his wife to the point of hospitalization, but sentenced him to learning by heart five parts of the Qur’an and 100 sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Just two Saudi women were permitted to participate in the Sochi Olympic Games.

But women’s rights are not the only ones regularly violated under Saudi Arabian restrictions. Beheading, stoning and flogging are all acceptable forms of criminal punishment. Homosexual acts are punishable by flogging, imprisonment and even death, as is drug use. Courts can impose sentences of flogging of 1,000 to 2,500 lashes, and thousands of people receive unfair trials and are subject to arbitrary detention.

According to Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia is stepping up its arrests and trials of peaceful dissidents, and responding with force to demonstrations by citizens.

Canada previously sold light-armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia, with more than 1,000 delivered in the early 1990s and 700 in 2009. By now the Saudis have used our LAVs for 20 years, so tradition and familiarity are considerations when they are going to buy.

We know our LAVs are some of the best multi-role wheeled vehicles in the world, and Saudi Arabia’s geography and road network is challenging, so the Saudis will get all the benefits of the vehicles’ low maintenance, high performance and flexibility with fewer rollovers, stuck vehicles and other terrain issues.

With this major contract, Canada beat out competition from France and Germany, so if we had not won the contract, presumably the Saudi government would have bought similar systems from the Europeans.

But selling our equipment for Saudi cash does mean Canada is helping prop up the Saudi government until 2028 — the end of this 14-year deal — which is a very long time to tolerate Saudi

Arabia’s terrible human rights record.

Presumably the LAVs could be used in Saudi Arabia by the National Guard, which is separate from the rest of the military and acts as a political counterbalance. But the LAVs’ end use in all these deals is uncertain. It should be transparent.

In fact, exactly how many LAVs are going to be exported has not been revealed — only that the contract is worth \$10 billion to \$13 billion here in Ontario — and since Canadians will make the money and get the work, few questions are being asked about the Saudi government’s abysmal human rights record.

While the Conservatives, defence experts and executives at General Dynamics effusively praise each other for their stalwart efforts to win the bid for Ontario’s manufacturing industry, millions of people in Saudi Arabia continue to suffer greatly under the restrictions imposed by the undemocratic Saudi government.

Canada’s International Trade Minister Ed Fast and London Mayor Joe Fontana are touting the deal’s economic benefits for our area, but more mention needs to be made of Saudi Arabia’s poor human rights record.

We need stricter export regulations that guarantee our military equipment is not used against civilians, a few of whom may rise up in the future — perhaps as part of the ongoing Arab Spring — to oppose one of the most repressive governments in the Middle East. We can see every day on our television screens what undemocratic governments, such as North Korea, Syria, and Russia, can do to their civilian populations.

More ethical questions need to be asked as Canada’s arms industry turns to more clients in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, like many others states in the Middle East, has an excessive accumulation of weapons because Saudi oil titans seem not to be able to think of anything better to buy with wads of oil cash.

There has been no news about Professor al-Qahtani since he began his hunger strike more than a month ago. Linking our military sales to progress made on improving the Saudi regime’s human rights record is only one solution.

We must act now to ensure the equipment built by London workers here in Canada is not used to somehow trample even more on the rights of people in the Middle East.

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